

## Migration and the Republic of Moldova

Migration has economic, social, demographic, cultural, security and environmental effects on both sending and receiving societies. Moldovans started to emigrate soon after the country proclaimed its independence in 1991, but emigration (especially labour emigration) peaked in the late 1990s following a severe economic crisis.

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### Falling economy

Moldova's economy is strongly driven by remittances. The number of Moldovans working abroad increased from some 56,000 in 1999 to 340,000 in 2007 (from a population of 3.8 million in 2007). Total remittances were USD 1.5 billion in 2007 (36% of Moldova's GDP) and were growing in the first half of 2008 prior to the global economic crisis (Maddock & Ramguttee, 2008).

According to the World Bank's new Migration and Remittances Factbook 2008, Moldova is the world's top receiver of migrant remittances as a percentage share of GDP. Hence, Moldova is the world's most remittance-dependent country.

Most of this migration is temporary, according to an International Organization for Migration (IOM) survey, with only 14 per cent of migrants planning to settle abroad permanently. Roughly 52 per cent of labour emigrants engage in seasonal work, most in countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). By comparison, those who choose to emigrate to the EU, e.g., Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom, due to the risk and high cost involved in illegal travel, leave Moldova for extended periods and a significant number intend to settle abroad (23%). As a result of the increasing outflow, remittances have become one of the most important sources of income for many Moldovan households, while also financing the country's trade account deficit (IOM, 2008).

Remittances have a huge social impact on families, communities and civil society. At the political level, migrants are not yet represented, but remittances are a source of financing for numerous political parties. It is not clear whether or not the short-term economic benefits of migration will outweigh the long-term social and political disadvantages. Until recently, remittances generated higher household incomes, but were rarely invested (IOM, 2008). However, International Monetary Fund analysts suggest that there has been a change in the consumption pattern over the last decade and more remittances are being directed into private investment. This could lead to more durable development in a transition country relying mainly on remittances to solve its economic problems (DSI Viitorul, 2008).

The suspension of remittances due to the global economic crisis will dramatically affect internal consumption in Moldova and the number of people living below the poverty level is likely to increase. Falls in remittances and the large-scale return of migrants could increase economic pressure in Moldova. The effects of falling remittances are likely to be felt nationwide, but, as migration in Moldova is principally from rural areas, it seems probable that these effects will be felt disproportionately in rural and urban areas. If so, there is the prospect of an increase in rural poverty. This was already a concern in Moldova, despite good growth performance between 1999 and 2004, which moved 40 per cent of the population out of poverty. Nonetheless, about 26 per cent of the Moldovan population in 2007 remained poor, with about two-thirds of the poor living in rural areas. A similarly rural concentration of impacts among returning migrants is likely if there is a disproportionate return to rural areas.

A disproportionate deterioration in youth unemployment is also possible. While youth unemployment is comparatively low in Moldova, this is partly due to the export of labour in the form of migrants. With opportunities for migration diminishing, young people will be forced to rely on domestic labour markets at a time of falling labour demand. Youth will have to compete with returned migrants, who may return with better skills and more experience. In other words, a generation of 'frustrated migrants' is likely to be created among the young, at the same time as competition is increasing in domestic labour markets. As a result, the possibility for social unrest is evident.

However, there may be some benefits. According to the Academy of Sciences of Moldova (ASM), decreased remittances as a result of the global economic crisis, "can also have positive effects [and] will inevitably lead to imports reduction, and that in its turn will stimulate the increase of real economy in order to fill in the vacuum of products on the internal market".

The ASM also concludes that a reduction in remittances will have the following impacts:

- The real sector of the economy will be affected, increasing the vulnerability of small enterprises and the agriculture sector, and, as a result, unemployment will increase.
- The national currency may devalue; in this context, a substantial increase in demand for strong

currency has already manifested on the currency market.

- The depreciation of the Leu may also have positive effects, such as a reduction in imports and the favouring of exports.
- An increase in exports may also precipitate an increase in local goods quality to conform to European standards.
- Budget revenue will decrease as well as the purchasing power of the population.

However, the ASM goes on to point out that the global economic crisis may not invoke a massive return of migrants, as the majority of Moldovan migrants are employed in activities that are unattractive to the population of receiving countries.

### Migration: A problem or solution

Migration affects both men and women, although the social, economic and demographic impact of women working abroad is becoming more and more obvious in Moldovan society. The proportion of women in migration flows is increasing. In 2004, women accounted for 34 per cent of all emigrants; this increased to 41 per cent in 2006. Emigrant women account for about 35 per cent of Moldova's female workforce, which represents a significant portion of the total labour force. The fact that this portion has left the domestic labour market generates a shortage of human resources in sectors traditionally dominated by women (education, health, agriculture).

Most emigrant women are aged between 30 and 40 years, and are mainly from rural areas. Most are, or have been, married and have children; therefore, their departure disrupts family life, especially the rearing of children. About 60 per cent of women stay in the countries of destination longer than 1.5 years.

Thus, the emigration of women not only diminishes the size of the labour force employed in the national economy, it also diminishes the number of women of reproductive age in Moldova. Emigration, even temporary or seasonal, minimises the possibility of such women having children. Moreover, being abroad for several years, many women are tempted to settle permanently in their receiving country and even get married there. When women are integrated into the society of the receiving country through marriage, they gain access to certain information

and services, and are thus able to provide important support for new migrants.

Illegally migrated women face an increased risk of morbidity, but are unable to access health-care services or the services of specialised NGOs. Their illegal status enhances their dependence on their employer, increasing the risk of forced sexual relations. The emigration of women also plays an important part in Moldova's divorce rate, which has been increasing since 1999.

Women's emigration represents a wide range of social and economic problems that, in the long term, will have significant consequences on the demographical structure and social relationships in Moldova. A great proportion of children are now being brought up in a new Moldovan family model – the family with emigrated parents – their socialisation framework being essentially modified.

Migration inevitably rearranges gender roles. In families where both parents are at home, the care provider role is played either by both the father and the mother (in 53% of families surveyed), or just the mother (in 32% of families surveyed). When the mother leaves, her role is often taken by the father or another female household member (Peleah, 2007). Most of the children whose mothers migrate (68%), no longer see them as care providers.

As labour migration from Moldova is generally a product of economic factors, migrants are often perceived by family members as the main providers. Interestingly, in both migrant and non-migrant cases, the proportion of dual-earning families is quite high (close to 45%). In families in which the father has migrated, the father is more likely to be perceived as the main breadwinner (in 47% of cases, compared to 31% in families without migrants). Likewise, the mother is less likely to be perceived as the main breadwinner (down to 6%, compared to 13% in families without migrants). Mothers are mentioned as the main providers in 45 per cent of families where the mother is absent – a sharp increase on the 13 per cent reported in non-migrant families. Both the father and mother are perceived as important breadwinners in 46 per cent of families in which mothers have migrated.

Women working abroad are more self-confident and have more self-esteem. While violence against women is widespread in Moldova, women who have worked abroad seem less willing to tolerate abuse by their partners. Instead, they seem more likely to insist that abusive partners change their behaviour; if not, they are more likely to divorce and try to rebuild their lives.

The migration of mothers seems to have a much larger negative impact on childcare than the migration of fathers. The survey data suggest that in 14 per cent of families with mother-migrants, children believe that no one is taking care of them (compared to only 3% for families with only the father abroad). Similar problems are evident in other areas of family life in which women traditionally play signif-

icant roles (education, homework, taking children to the doctor, and supervising children during leisure time).

Changes in gender roles can influence communities as well as families. Many respondents suggested that women's migration gives them financial independence and increases decision-making power. They also noted that migrant women increasingly model themselves on the behaviour of women in the receiving country. A wife's departure to work abroad may be perceived as threatening by her husband, particularly in view of paternalistic expectations in Moldovan society. She will earn more and may try to manage this income herself. This can threaten the husband's status as head of the family; he may look for a new partner or may seek comfort in alcohol. In cases where women's work abroad is associated with prostitution, women's migration may bring stigma on themselves and their families. Migration – particularly of mothers – may lead to the 'disappearance' of certain family roles. This is especially dangerous if it has a long-term impact on children's development and wellbeing.

Another major risk faced by women, especially young women, who attempt to migrate illegally is their exposure to trafficking for sexual exploitation, which has destructive effects on their physical and psychological health and future social relationships. So far, the organisations that specialise in assisting trafficked victims have assisted over 2000 female victims from Moldova, most of them in need of psychological and medical assistance (La Strada Informational Centre, 2005).

Another problem associated with migration is the 'brain drain'. Despite numerous, and often humiliating, restrictions on Moldovans entering many destination countries, the qualified Moldovan workforce continues to look for opportunities abroad. This creates significant shortages of qualified labour (e.g., doctors and engineers) in the domestic labour market.

Migration has both positive and negative effects on communities and families. Intervention is needed at the governmental level to decrease the negative social impacts of migration. Measures may include the promotion of circular migration, which allows migrants to learn from their experiences abroad while stimulating their return, for example, through fiscal facilities and institutional guarantees of work or scholarships. ■

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